

Melvin Van Peebles: Original Notes In a Spare Space: For Melvin Van ...

By SUZANNE SLESIN

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pg. C1

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**M**ELVIN VAN PEEBLES — writer, film maker, producer, actor, songwriter, director, financial analyst — never does anything quite the way anyone else does. His style combines the straightforward and the theatrical.

The redesigning of his Manhattan apartment is one example of his originality. A living room focused on a freestanding rooftop skylight, an archway modeled after a 1950's jukebox and a ceiling fan that whirs slowly in a monastic bedroom are some of the unusual decorating details masterminded by the iconoclastic Mr. Van Peebles.

He is well known as a movie maker (the 1967 "Story of a Three-Day Pass" and the 1970 "Sweet Sweetback's Baadasssss Song"), playwright ("Ain't Supposed to Die

a Natural Death" in 1971), record producer and author of numerous books including the 1986 "Bold Money."

The entertainer thrives on doing several different things at the same time. He is working on a novel and earlier this week he was on the West Coast filming with his son Mario, who is starring in a new television series, "Sonny Spoon."

Mr. Van Peebles, 55 years old, spent more than four years in his one-bedroom Manhattan co-op in the West 50's without changing it.

"I prefer to live in a place and get to know its quirks, idiosyncrasies and the corners that please you," Mr. Van Peebles said of his intentionally slow design start. "I feel a major error is made when people pre-decide what suits them in an apartment. You have to let the place breathe, because it usually has a life

*Continued on Page C6*



# For Melvin Van Peebles, Original Notes in a Spare Space

Continued From Page C1

of its own."

Mr. Van Peebles, however, has very clear ideas about decorating in general. "The word I have in mind is enhancement," he said. That means, he added, "highlighting the things that pleased me, soothed me, or that I found functional."

He left the windows bare to take advantage of the apartment's spectacular views, and kept the rooms spare and uncluttered. A priority was to install a telephone in the bathroom. "One of the things I feared most was the phone ringing while I was in the shower," he said.

Over a year ago, when Mr. Van Peebles felt he knew the apartment well enough to proceed with the renovation, he pulled out a yellowed newspaper clipping. "It was about black interior designers," he said of the article, which described an exhibition of projects by young black student designers, organized by Isabel Taylor-Helton. "I thought I had been saving it for a few months," he said. "It turned out to have been over six years. What the heck, I thought I'd give a call anyway."

Mrs. Taylor-Helton remembers the call exactly. "It was Oct. 3, 1986—a Friday," she said. "Would I be available to come by and see the apart-

**A wood-shuttered, narrow corridor evokes 'a car on the Orient Express.'**

ment and we could go on from there?"

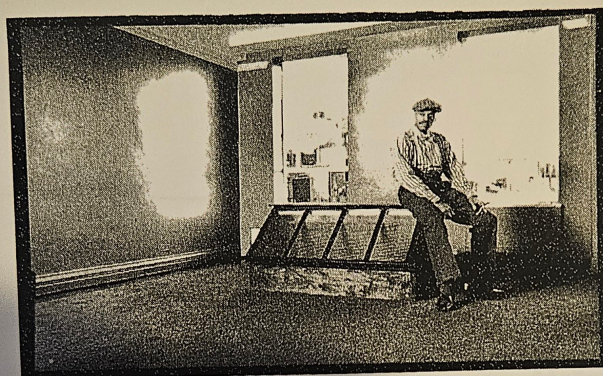
The chance for an offbeat assignment came at a convenient time for Mrs. Taylor-Helton, who is now 54. "My life had changed," explained the designer, a graduate of the New York School of Interior Design. "I no longer had the desire to work like a traditional decorator. I felt a definite need existed for a new kind of design consultant, in which the designer is a researcher and collaborator."

As it happened, Mr. Van Peebles and Mrs. Taylor-Helton communicated ideally, not as client and designer but more as co-designers.

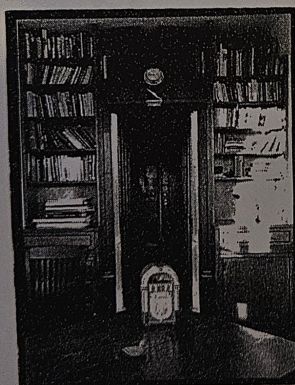
"The apartment was built as if it was a stage set," explained Mrs. Taylor-Helton. "It was a very hands-on approach that included digging through boxes of metal and dirty plastic on Canal Street or seeking out fine fabrics in designer showrooms."

"With plaster falling down your neck, asbestos sticking under your thumb and plastic that would not stay bent correctly, Isabel was a life preserver to a drowning man," Mr. Van Peebles said. "She listened to what I said and translated it in architectural terms — and without an attitude." She was well worth her \$50-an-hour fee.

"We made lots of things from found objects," Mrs. Taylor-Helton explained, referring to one of the apartment's most striking details: an archway topped with a colorful il-



Melvin Van Peebles sits on the skylight-table in his "rooftop" living room.



Small study has a mahogany doorway made from an antique frame, above left. Telephone in the shape of a soda can is kept in niche in bathtub enclosure, above right.



The New York Times/Andrew Bone

Monastic bedroom, top, has rough plaster walls. Isabel Taylor-Helton, above, was the design consultant.

luminated frame inspired by a classic Wurlitzer jukebox design.

The jukebox-shaped archway links the entrance foyer to the tiny book-lined study, where "English manor meets Art Deco," said Mr. Van Peebles. The narrow corridor with its floor-to-ceiling wood shutters is Mr. Van Peebles's version of "a car on the Orient Express as it's pulling into Budapest," he said.

While a contractor-workman was

hired to carry out the basic construction, Mr. Van Peebles experimented and made some details himself, including the metal, tin, plastic and wood archway.

"After all," he said, "each time you put down the first page in a novel or step out in front of an audience, or buy a bond issue, you're leaping into the unknown. That doesn't frighten me, because I've been there before."

Mr. Van Peebles seems to enjoy the

surprised reaction of visitors, especially when they walk into the nearly empty living room, which is dominated by a skylight that sits on the floor.

"My muse seems to be very fond of rooftops, where we would sit and write and think," Mr. Van Peebles said. "So when I needed a table, I went to a skylight maker and asked him to make me one with sides that could be raised to turn it into a table."

The deep turquoise walls, two grass-colored area rugs and special lighting hidden behind the crisp white moldings reinforce the outdoor effect.

The bedroom, with rough walls, uncarpeted wood floors and a plain single bed, is as stark as a Mediterranean island retreat. "I like very monastic settings," Mr. Van Peebles said. "I spend a great deal of time here, writing or doing business, and I

like to keep it very free of any distraction."

Some of his friends still ask when he is going to finish his apartment.

Mr. Van Peebles considers it done.

"One could look at this environment and say, 'Melvin, you're \$100,000 poorer now,'" Mr. Van Peebles said, with an expansive gesture around his chef-de-becore. "I would say, 'You're wrong: I'm \$100,000 richer because I'm happy.'"

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